

s. Baring - gould
the
holy grail



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When Sir Lancelot came to the palace of King Pelles, in the words of Sir Thomas Malory (1), "either of them made much of other, and so they went into the castle for to take their repast. And anon there came in a dove at the window, and in her bill there seemed a little sencer of gold, and therewith there was such a savour as though all the spicery of the world had been there; and forthwith all there was upon the table all manner of meates and drinckes that they could thinke upon. So there came a damosell, passing faire and young, and she beare a vessell of gold betweene her hands, and thereto the king kneeled devoutly and said his prayers, and so did all that were there: 'Oh, Jesu!' said Sir Launcelot, 'what may this meane?' 'This is', said King Pelles, 'the richest thing that any man hath living; and when this thing goeth about, the round-table shall bee broken. And wit yee well', said King Pelles, 'that this is the holy Sancgreall which yee have heere seene'."

The next to see the sacred vessel was the pious Sir Bors. And after that he had seen it, "he was led to bed into a faire large chamber, and many doores were shut about that chamber. And when Sir Bors espied all those doores, he made all the people to avoide, for he might have no body with him; but in no wise Sir Bors would unarme him, but so laid him upon the bed. And right so he saw come in a light that he might wel see a speare great and long which come straight upon him pointlong. And so Sir

Bors seemed that the head of the speare brent like a taper; and anon, or Sir Bors wist, the speare head smote him into the shoulder an hand breadth in deepness, and that wound grieved Sir Bors passing sore".

One day, when King Arthur and his court were at Camelot, sitting at supper, "anon they heard cracking and crying of thunder, that hem thought the place should all to-rive; in the midst of the blast entred a sunne-beame more clear by seaven times than ever they saw day, and all they were alighted by the grace of the Holy Ghost. Then began every knight to behold other, and either saw other by their seeming fairer than ever they saw afore, nor for then there was no knight that might speake any word a great while; and so they looked every man on other as they had beene dombe. Then there entred into the hall the holy grale covered with white samite, but there was none that might see it, nor who beare it, and there was all the hall fulfilled with good odours, and every knight had such meate and drinke as he best loved in this world; and when the holy grale had beene borne through the hall, then the holy vessel departed suddenly, and they wist not where it became".

Then the knights stood up in their places one after another, and vowed to go in quest of the Sangreal, and not to return to the round-table till they had obtained a full view of it.

We must leave the knights to start upon their quest, and turn, for the history of the Grail, to the romance of the San Greal, the Perceval of Chrétien de Troyes, written at the close of the twelfth century, and the Titurel and Parcival of Wolfram von Eschenbach, translated into German from romances older

than that of Chrétien de Troyes.

When Christ was transfixed by the spear, there flowed from His side blood and water. Joseph of Arimathea collected the blood in the vessel from which the Saviour had eaten the last supper. The enraged Jews cast Joseph into prison, and left him to die of hunger. But for forty-two years he lay in the dungeon nourished and invigorated by the sacred vessel which was in his possession. Titus released Joseph from prison, and received baptism at his hands. Then Joseph started with the vessel and the blood, or the Sangreal, for Britain. Before he died, he confided the sacred treasure to his nephew. But according to another version of the legend, the Grail was preserved in heaven, till there should appear on earth a race of heroes, worthy to become its guardians. The chief of this line was an Asiatic prince, named Perillus, who came to Gaul, where his descendants allied themselves with the family of a Breton prince. Titurel, who sprang from this heroic lineage, was the one chosen of God to found the worship of the Sangreal among the Gauls. Angels brought the vessel to him, and instructed him in its mysteries. He erected, on the model of the temple at Jerusalem, a magnificent temple to the Grail. He organized a band of guardians of the vessel, and elaborated the ceremonial of its worship. The Grail, we are told, was only visible to the baptized, and only partially if they were tainted by sin. To the pure in heart alone was it perfectly visible.

Every Good Friday a white dove descended from heaven, bearing a white oblation which it laid before the Grail. The holy vessel gave oracles, expressed miraculously in characters which appeared on the surface of the bowl, and then vanished.

Spiritual blessings attended on the vision and custody of the sacred vessel; the guardians, and those who were privileged to behold it, were conscious of a mysterious internal joy, a foretaste of that of heaven. The material blessings are easier to be described. The Grail stood in the place of all food, it supplied its worshippers with the meats they most desired and the drinks most to their taste; it maintained them in perpetual youth. The day on which the Grail had been seen, its guardians were incapable of being wounded or suffering any hurt. If they fought for eight days after the vision, they were susceptible of wounds but not of death.

Every thing in the construction of the temple was full of mystery. It was erected on Montsalvatsch, of precious stones, gold, and aloe-wood. In form it was circular; there were three principal entrances. The knights who watched the Grail were patterns of virtue. All sensual love, even within the limits of marriage, was strictly forbidden. A single thought of passion would obscure the eye and conceal the mystic vessel. The chief of this order of knights was entitled King. As his office was hereditary, he was permitted to marry.

When the faith or the right was in jeopardy, a bell rang in the chapel of the Grail, and a knight was bound to go forth sword in hand to the defence. Wherever he was, should a question be asked him of his condition or office in the temple, he was to refuse to answer, and at once return to Montsalvatsch.

Titurel reigned four hundred years, and he, to all appearances, seemed of the age of forty. He was succeeded in his office by his son Frimutelle, who transgressed, by loving a damsel, Floramie by name.

Consequently he lost the grace of the holy Grail, and fell in a joust, engaged in to give pleasure and do honour to his mistress.

He was succeeded by his son Amfortas, who fell into grievous sin, and was given over by the Grail to be wounded by a lance. Then it was announced that he should not be healed of his wound till one came, pure and young, to Montsalvatsch who would see the mysteries of the sacred vessel, and ask their signification.

This Amfortas is the Pelles or Pellam of the "Mort d'Arthure".

Years passed, and the king lay wounded in his palace. The brotherhood of the Grail was dissolved, and the existence of the temple and its mystic rites was almost forgotten. Sir Thomas Malory gives a different account of the wounding of the king from that in the Romans du San Greal, and makes his healing depend on the arrival of a knight who is a "clean maid", who shall apply to him the sacred blood.

In the fulness of time, Galahad, the Good Knight, came to King Arthur's court, and went forth, with the other knights, to the quest of the holy Grail.

Let us follow Launcelot who was on a ship.

"The winde arose and drove Sir Launcelot more than a moneth throughout the sea, where he slept but little and prayed unto God that he might have a sight of the Sancgreall. So it befell upon a night at midnight hee arived afore a castle on the backe

side, which was rich and faire, and there was a posterne that opened toward the sea, and was open without any keeping, save two lions kept the entrie, and the moone shined cleare.

"Anon Sir Launcelot heard a voice that said, 'Launcelot, goe out of this ship, and enter into the castle where thou shalt see a great part of thy desire'. Then he ranne to his armes, and armed him, and so hee went unto the gate, and saw the two lions; then hee set hands to his sword and drew it; then came there sudainly a dwarfe, that smote him upon the arme so sone that the sword fell out of his hand. Then he heard a voice that said, 'Oh man of evill faith and poore believe, wherefore believest thou more in thy harneis than in thy Maker? for Hee might more availe thee than thine armour, in whose service thou art set'. - Then Sir Launcelot entered in so armed, and hee found no gate nor doore but it was opened. And so at the last he found a chamber whereof the doore was shut, and hee set his hands thereto for to have opened it, but hee might not. Then he enforced him much for to undoe the doore. Then he listened; and heard a voice which sung so sweetly that it seemed none earthly thing, and him thought that the voice said, 'Joy and honour be to the Father of heaven'. Then Sir Launcelot kneeled downe before the chamber, for well he wist that there was the Sancgreall in that chamber. Then said he, 'Faire sweete Father, Jesu Christ, if ever I did thing that pleased the Lord, for thy pittie ne have me not in despite for my foull sins done here before time, and that thou shew me some thing of that which I seek'.

"And with that he saw the chamber doore open, and there came out a great clearenesse, that the house was as bright as though all the torches of the world had beene there. So came hee to the chamber

doore, and would have entered, and anon a voice said unto him, 'Flee, Sir Launcelot, and enter not, for thou oughtest not to doe it, and if thou enter thou shalt forethinke it'. And hee withdrew him back, and was right heavie in his mind.

"Then looked hee up in the midst of the chamber, and saw a table of silver, and the holy vessell covered with red samite, and many angels about it, whereof one of them held a candell of waxe burning, and the other held a crosse, and the ornaments of the altar. And before the holy vessell hee saw a good man clothed like a priest, and it seemed that hee was at the saking of the masse; and it seemed unto Sir Launcelot that above the priest's hands there were three men, whereof the two put the youngest by likeness betweene the priest's hands, and so hee lift it up on high, and it seemed to show so to the people. And then Sir Launcelot mervailed not a little, for him thought that the priest was so greatly charged of the figure, that him seemed that heem should have fallen to the ground; and when hee saw none about him that would helpe him, then hee came to the doore a great pace - and entred into the chamber, and came toward the table of silver; and when he came nigh he felt a breath, that him thought was intermedled with fire, which smote him so sore in the visage that him thought it all to-brent his visage, and therewith he fell to the ground, and had no power to arise".

Sir Galahad, Sir Percival, and Sir Bors met in the forest, and rode together to the castle of King Pelles. There they supped, and after supper they beheld a great light, and in the light were four angels bearing up an ancient man in bishop's vestments, and they set him down before a table of silver, on which appeared the Sangreal. And this aged prelate was Joseph of Arimathea, "the first bishop of Christen-



dom". Then other angels appeared bearing candles, and a spear from which fell drops of blood, and these drops were collected by an angel in a box. Then the angels set the candles upon the table, and "the fourth set the holy speare even upright upon the vessel", as represented on an ancient churchyard crucifix, in rude sculpture, at Sancreed in Cornwall.

Joseph next celebrated the sacred mysteries, and, at the consecration, our Blessed Lord appeared and said, "Galahad, sonne, wotest thou what I hold betweene My hands?" "Nay", replied the maiden knight, "but if yee tell mee". "This is",

He said, "the holy dish wherein I eate the lambe on Sher-Thursday, and now hast thou seene that thou desirest most to see, but yet hast thou not seene it so openly as thou shalt see it in the citie of Sarras, in the spirituall place. Therefore thou must goe hence, and beare with thee this holy vessell, for this night it shall depart from the realme of Logris, that it shall never be seen more here".

So Galahad, after having anointed the wounded king with the blood which dropped from the spear, and made him whole, departed with his friends Bors and Perceval to the mystic city of Sarras, where he was made king.

The story is somewhat different in the Perceval of Chrétien de Troyes. This romance was commenced by Chrétien at the request of Phillip of Alsace, Count of Flanders; it was continued by Gauthier de Denet, and finished by Manessier, towards the close of the twelfth century. It is the history of the quest of

the San Greal.

Perceval was the son of a poor widow in Wales, brought up by her in a forest, far removed from all warlike images. One day he saw a knight ride past, and from that moment he had no rest, till his mother gave him arms and let him ride to the court of King Arthur. On his way he saw a tent in which lay a beautiful damsel asleep. Perceval took the ring from her finger, ate and drank at the table which was spread in the tent, and then pursued his course. As he entered the court at Cardueil, a felon knight stole the goblet from the king's table. Perceval went in pursuit. One evening he entered a castle where lay a sick king on a couch. The door of the hall opened, and there came in a servant bearing a bleeding lance, others with golden candlesticks, and finally the holy Grail. Perceval asked no questions, and was reproached on his leaving the castle for not making inquiries into the mystery of the Grail. Afterwards he undertook the quest of this marvellous vessel, but had great difficulty in finding again the castle of the wounded king. When his search was crowned with success, he asked the signification of the mystic rite which took place before his eyes, and was told that the king was a Fisher, descended from Joseph of Arimathea, and uncle of Perceval; that the spear was that which had pierced the Saviour's side, and that the Grail was the vessel in which the sacred blood of Christ had been collected. The king had been wounded in trying to mend a sword which had been broken by a knight named Pertinax, and which could only be welded together by a knight without fear and reproach. The Fisher-king would recover health only when Pertinax died. On hearing this, Perceval sought out and slew Pertinax, healed his uncle, obtained in return the sacred vessel and the

bleeding lance, and retired to a hermitage. On his death -

"Fut au ciel remis sans doutance
Et le Saint-Graal et la Lance."

It is very certain that Chrétien de Troyes was not the inventor of this mystic tale, for there exists in the "Red Book" a Welsh tale entitled Pheredur, which is indisputably the original of Perceval.

The "Red Book" is a volume of Welsh prose and verse romances and tales, begun in the year 1318, and finished in 1454. It is preserved in the library of Jesus College, Oxford. Although Pheredur was transcribed after Perceval was composed, it bears evidence of a higher antiquity.

Pheredur is not a Christian. His habits are barbarous. The Grail is not a sacred Christian vessel, but a mysterious relic of a past heathen rite. The same incidents occur in Perceval as in Pheredur, but in the former they are modified and softened, and various points indicative of barbarism and paganism are omitted.

Pheredur enters a castle, and "Whilst he and his uncle were discoursing together, they beheld two young men entering the hall, bearing a lance of unusual length, from the point of which distilled three goutts of gore; and when the company beheld this, they began to wail and lament. But the old man continued to talk with Pheredur; and as he did not tell Pheredur the reason of what took place, Pheredur did not venture to ask him. And when the cries ceased, there entered two damsels with a basin in which was the head of a man swimming in blood. Then

the company uttered a piercing wail."

In the Perceval, and in the Mort d'Arthure, the head is omitted, and to the lance and grail are attributed a Christian value; but in the Pheredur there is no trace whatever of these symbols having any Christian signification.

Pheredur signifies, according to M. de la Villemarqué (2), "The Companion of the Basin", and is a synonym of Perceval; Per being a basin, and Kéval and Kédur having alike the meaning of companion.

Pheredur is mentioned as well in the Annales Cambriae, which extend from the year 444 to 1066. Geoffrey of Monmouth also speaks of the reign of Peredure, "who governed the people with generosity and mildness, so that he even excelled his other brothers who had preceded him (3)"; and the anonymous author of the "Life of Merlin" speaks of him as the companion and consoler of the bard (4). Aneurin, the contemporary of Hengst and Horsa, the author of the Gododin, terms him one of the most illustrious princes of the Isle of Britain (5).

Taliesin ben Beirdd, the famous poet of the same age, speaks of the sacred vessel in a manner which connects it with bardic mythology. "This vessel," he says, "inspires poetic genius, gives wisdom, discovers the knowledge of futurity, the mysteries of the world, the whole treasure of human sciences." And he describes it as adorned like the Grail, with a beading of pearls and diamonds (6). One of his poems contains the history of Bran the Blessed, in which the mystic vessel occupies a prominent position.

One day, whilst hunting in Ireland, Bran arrived on the banks of a lake, called the Lake of the Basin. He saw there a black and hideous giant, a witch, and a dwarf, rise from the water holding a vessel in their hands. He persuaded them to accompany him to Wales, where he lodged them in his palace, and in return for his hospitality, received the basin. This vase had the property of healing all mortal ills, of staunching blood, of resuscitating the dead. But those who were restored to life by it were not enabled to speak, lest they should divulge the mysteries of the vessel. At a banquet given by Bran to Martholone, King of Ireland, the Welsh prince presented the bowl to his guest. He regretted that he had made this present, when some years later war broke out between the King of Ireland and himself. Then he found himself unable to cope with his adversary, whose every slain soldier recovered life by means of the sacred vessel. But Bran smote off the head of a hostile chief, and cast the bloody head into the bowl, when it burst and its virtues ceased.

This basin was reckoned as one of the thirteen wonders of the Isle of Britain, brought by Merdhyn, or Merlin, in his crystal ark. That it is the same as Ceridwen's cauldron is not improbable. Ceridwen was the Keltic Great Mother, the Demeter, the source of life, and the receptacle of the dead. The story of her cauldron is told in the Pair Ceridwen (vessel of Ceridwen), or Hanes Taliesin (History of Taliesin).

In ancient times there was a man, Tegid Voel by name, who had a wife called Ceridwen, by whom he had a son Morvran ap Tegid, and a daughter Creirwy, both very beautiful; also Afagddu, the most hideous of beings. Ceridwen, knowing that the poor deformed

child would have little joy of life, determined to prepare for him the Water of Inspiration. She placed a cauldron on a fire, filled it with the requisite ingredients, and left little Gwion to attend to its seething, and blind Morda to keep up the fire for a year and a day, without suffering the operation to cease for a moment. One day, near the end of the twelve-month, three drops spirted out of the bubbling liquid, and Gwion caught them on his finger. As they scalded him, he put his finger into his mouth, and at once obtained the knowledge of futurity. He saw that Ceridwen would attempt his death, in consequence of his having tasted the precious drops; so he prudently took to flight. Then the cauldron burst and extinguished the fire.

Ceridwen, in her rage, struck Morda on the head, and rushed in pursuit of Gwion the Little. He transformed himself into a hare; then she took the form of a hound. He sprang into a river and took that of a fish; instantly she became an otter. Then he rose from the water as a little bird; but she soared after him as a hawk. Then he dropped as a grain of wheat on a corn-heap; but Ceridwen, instantly taking the shape of a hen, swallowed him. She became pregnant thereby, and in nine months gave birth to a lovely child which she hid in a leather coracle and committed to the waves, on the 29th of April.

In this bardic tale we have certainly a very ancient Keltic myth. What the cauldron signifies it is difficult to ascertain. Some suppose it to represent the ocean, others the working of the vital force of earth, which produces the three seasons which are good, symbolized by the drops. But we know too little of druidic mythology, and those legends which have come to us have descended in a too altered

form, for us to place much confidence in such conjectures.

But that this vessel of the liquor of Wisdom held a prominent place in British mythology is certain from the allusions made to it by the bards. Taliesin, in the description of this initiation into the mysteries of the basin, cries out, "I have lost my speech!" because on all who had been admitted to the privileges of full membership secrecy was imposed. This initiation was regarded as a new birth, and those who had once become joined members were regarded as elect, regenerate, separate from the rest of mankind, who lay in darkness and ignorance.

That originally the ceremonies of initiation included human sacrifices is more than probable from the vessel being represented as containing human blood, and a lance forming part of the paraphernalia, from which dropped blood. In the story of Pheredur, the vessel contained a man's head floating in gore. In that of Bran the Blessed, the head is thrown into the basin to destroy its efficacy. Taliesin also refers to Pheredur as "the hero of the bleeding head (7)".

The lance is also referred to by Welsh authors. One of the predictions attributed to Taliesin holds out to the Britons the hope that "the Kingdom of Logres (England) shall perish before the bleeding lance"; and five centuries later, Chrétien de Troyes quotes this saying -

"Il est écrit qu'il est une heure,
Ou tout le royaume de Logres,
Qui jadis fut la terre ès Ogres,
Sera détruit par cette lance."

This lance was probably a symbol of war.

The first to adapt the druidic mystery to Christianity was a British hermit, who wrote a Latin legend on the subject. Helinandus (d.1227) says, "At this time (A.D. 720), in Britain, a marvellous vision was shown by an angel to a certain hermit: it was of the basin or paropsis in which the Saviour supped with His disciples; concerning which the history was written by the same hermit, which is called the Gradal." And he adds, "In French they give the name gradal, or graal, to a large, rather deep vessel, in which rich meats with their gravy are served to the wealthy (8)."

The date at which lived this anchorite is not certain, for though Helinandus says he had his vision in 720, Usher places him later than 1140 (9).

After the composition of this legend, the romancers took possession of the myth and adapted it to Christian chivalrous exigencies. The bardic table of the elect became the round-table of Arthur's knights, and the sacred vessel of mysteries became the Grail. The head of the victim was forgotten, and the sacrificial blood was supposed to be that of Christ.

It is likely that the tradition of the ancient druidic brotherhood lingered on and gained consistency again among the Templars. Just as the Miles Templi fought for the holy sepulchre, so did the soldier of Montsalvatsch for the holy Grail. Both orders were vowed to chastity and obedience, both were subject to a head, who exercised regal authority. The ancient temple of the Grail, like Stonehenge, was circular; so also were the churches dedicated to S. Sepulchre, by the soldier-monks. The charge of heresy was brought against the order

of the Templars, and it has been supposed that they were imbued with gnosticism. That this Eastern heresy should have influenced a medieval Western society, I think very unlikely; no other traces of gnosticism are to be found in the religious history of the Occident, which certainly would have been the case had the heresy been sufficiently powerful to have obtained mastery over an ecclesiastical society. I think the root of the false doctrine or practices of the Templars must be looked for in the West.

The Templars were charged with having an idol which the Chronicles of S. Denys (which terminate 1461) describe as "an old skin embalmed and polished, in which the Templar places his very vile faith and trust, and in which he confidently believes: and it has in the sockets eyes of carbuncle shining with the brightness of the sky." Abraham Bzov, in his continuation of the "Church History" of Baronius, quotes a charge brought by the Italian bishops against the Templars, to this effect: "They have a certain head, the face pale like that of a man, with black curled hair, and round the neck a gilded ornament, which indeed belonged to no saint, and this they adored, making prayers before it." And one of the questions asked by the Pope of the witnesses was "whether they had not a skull or some sort of image, to which they rendered divine homage?" So also the Chronicle of Meaux states, that on the first day of the General Council of the Templars, a head with a white beard, which had belonged to a former Grand Master of the Order, was set at midnight before the altar in a chapel, covered with silken robes and precious stuffs. Mass was sung before daylight, and the head was then adored by the Master and the other knights.

It seems to me probable that this head, if there were truth in the charge, was revered because it was part of an ancient druidic rite to produce a head upon a vessel, though for what purposes we do not know. Friar Bacon constructed a head which gave oracles. Possibly some such property was attributed to the Templar, and previously to the druidic head. Livy tells us that a bloody head of an enemy was a national Keltic symbol (xxiii. 24), and that the Boii brought the head into their temples, where they cleansed it and adorned it with gold, and then used it on festivals for a sacred vessel, out of which to make drink-offerings.

To enter with anything like completeness into the most interesting and intricate subject of druidic mythology and ceremonial would occupy too much space. This paper will necessarily be imperfect; the religion of our British ancestors has yet to be written. Those who have hitherto approached the subject have done so with preconceived theories which have caused them to read wrong the sacred myths and rites they were interpreting. Much is to be learned from the Arthurian Romances, much from bardic remains, and much from Breton, Welsh, Gaelic and Irish folk-lore.

That all thus recovered will be in a corrupted form I am well aware, but a practised eye will be able to restore what is disintegrated, and will know to detect antiquity, though disguised under the newest robe.

A careful study of these sources, conducted by the light of comparative mythology will, I am satisfied, lead to the discovery that, under the name of Methodism, we have the old druidic religion still

alive, energetic, and possibly more vigorous than it was when it exercised a spiritual supremacy over the whole of Britain. With the loss of the British tongue, much of the old terminology has died out, and a series of adaptations to Christianity has taken place, without radically affecting the system.

NOTES

- (1) Sir Thomas Malory, 'La Mort d'Arthure'.
- (2) Villemarqué, 'Les Romans de la Table-Ronde', 1861.
- (3) Geoffrey of Monmouth, 'The History of the Kings of Britain', Bk. 3, Ch. 18.
- (4) 'Vita Merlini', pp. 2.4.
- (5) Villemarqué, 'Poèmes des Bardes Bretons du sixième siècle', p.298.
- (6) 'Myvyrian Archaiology of Wales', i. pp. 17,18,19, 20.37.45.67.
- (7) Ibid, 1. p.80.
- (8) Vincent. Belov. Speculum Hist., lib.xxiii. c.147.
- (9) Usserius, 'Primordia', p.16.
- (10) Author's Note : "Exception has been taken to this remark ... but the writer believes unjustly. Those who have made the fragments of Bardic religious poems and the scheme of Druidic rites their study, cannot fail with astonishment to note the remarkable coincidence which exists between modern Wesleyanism and the religion of our British forefathers.

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THE HOLY GRAIL, or Sangreal, is as mysterious in form as it is in purpose. Some authors hold it to be a dish; others a chalice; yet others a book or inscribed stone. The Arthurian Romances, featuring the Quest of the Grail by the knights of King Arthur's court, have popularised the legend that it was the vessel used by Christ at the Last Supper, and later, by Joseph of Arimathea, to collect Christ's blood as He hung upon the cross. The oldest accounts of the Grail, however, are without such Christian signification and reach back to the world of Celtic myth ... to the magical vessel of Bran the Blessed, which could restore the dead to life, and the Cauldron of Inspiration prepared by the goddess Ceridwen to bestow the knowledge of futurity upon her son.

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